



## **Status of Jews at the dawn of the French Revolution**

Vanishree Radhakrishna

Research Fellow, Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy (CSSEIP)  
National Law School of India University, Bangalore, India.

### **I. Introduction**

Any historic study of the Jews in Europe is replete with the striking reality of historic injustice that has been perpetrated upon the community through a Christian legacy handed down over several generations. The community of Jews in Europe suffered peculiar social, economic and political disabilities in a caste system in which they were ostracized, condemned to perform certain occupations and relegated to certain geographical locations, making their case a unique one, froth with stigma and hatred. The pariah status of Jews in Europe was thus a common and accepted way of life. On the eve of the Revolution of 1789, Jews, along with minorities such as actors and undertakers were criticized by a hypocrite society that depended on the services of the above category of humans while equally detesting their presence.

The spirit and rhetoric of the French Revolution of 1789 influenced the political and social language of France, as a catalyst that ultimately resulted in the recognition of Jewish political rights, supposedly on par with the other citizens of France. The Declaration of the rights of Man was enshrined in such universal language as *man, general welfare, natural rights, society and general will*<sup>1</sup>. Thus the Jewish "emancipation" can be considered a logical consequence of the Declaration of the Rights of Man<sup>2</sup>.

Whether the "emancipation" resulted in the actual upliftment of the Jews or a complete assimilation or it ironically resulted in the creation of a renewed Jewish identity, has been a matter of controversy among intellectuals and historians<sup>3</sup>. Wendy Brown has argued that the "regeneration" of the Jewish identity has ultimately resulted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century "racialization" where the Jew had to die, giving rise to a race of Jews.<sup>4</sup> This, she argues was carried out through disciplines such as Anthropology, Biology, Philology and Literature, where physical traits such as skin color, health, nose, genitals and feet became the sustaining factors of Jewishness rather than religious practices or distinctions.<sup>5</sup>

This paper argues that although the "emancipation" of the Jews has been coated in magnanimous terms, one must bear in mind the political and philosophical climate of Europe in general and France in particular, when analyzing the "Jewish question". The path to obtaining civil rights and citizenship was neither an easy one nor was it an unconditional endowment. The rights were recognized in fragments and there were marked categories of citizens created, adding further qualifications in the process of political empowerment. However, despite the delayed and qualified recognition of political rights of the Jews in France, in an overall summation of the status of Jews, it is the first step towards citizenship that had a tremendous influence with in France and across Europe.

### **II. Social and economic disparities among the Jews**

The Jewish community in France at the time of the revolution was not a static or unified and cohesive whole. The Sephardic Jews of Bordeaux were descendants of the migrants from Spain and Portugal. <sup>6</sup>They were

<sup>1</sup>Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen, 1789. see appendix

<sup>2</sup> Esther Benbasi *The Jews of France: A history from antiquity to the present*, (princeton University Press, New Jersey) 82.

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Pierre Birnbaum *Jewish Destinies: citizenship, State, and Community in Modern France*, (Hill and Wang, New York, 2000) 31-35.

<sup>4</sup> Wendy Brown, "Tolerance and / or equality? the "Jewish question" and the "woman question" *Differences : A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol 15, No 2, Summer 2004, 5.

<sup>5</sup>ibid.

<sup>6</sup>, Marie Shanti Singham "Betwixt Cattle and Men: Jews, Blacks and Women and the Declaration of the Rights of Man" in *The French idea of Freedom- The old regime and the Declaration of Rights of 1789*, ed. Dale Vankley (Stafford university Press, 1994)

wealthy, educated, French speaking and had assimilated into the French society and enjoyed such privileges as the right to trade and freedom of movement.<sup>7</sup> Their admittance into France was on the pretext of being “New Christians” or *Conversos*<sup>8</sup>. They were subject only to a nominal authority of the Catholic church and practiced Judaism in a discreet manner<sup>9</sup>. Having participated in the slave trades, they even went on to take part in the 1789 Estates General elections.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, the Ashkenazic Jews residing in Alsace, Lorraine and Metz, were Yiddish speaking, following traditional form of Judaism and were very poor.<sup>11</sup> They were subjected to heavy taxes and restricted movement and they were the most hated class.<sup>12</sup> Forbidden from land ownership, they engaged in petty trade and money lending<sup>13</sup>. The Jews in Avignon were in a more advantageous position and engaged in silk and drapery business whereas the Jews in Paris were legally non-existent.<sup>14</sup>

Given their distinct roots, levels of assimilation in to the French society and their social, economic and political influences, the Jews in France lacked a feeling of unity. While the Jews of Ashkenazim of Alsace and Lorraine sought to achieve civic equality and advocated education for the upliftment of the poor Jews, the Sepharic Jews of Bordeaux and Bayonne dreaded aligning themselves with the poor and more traditional Jews whom they considered inferior, lest their own status be jeopardized by associating with them.<sup>15</sup> They were apprehensive of any common legal status equating all the Jews, as they were already enjoying certain privileges and feared losing them.<sup>16</sup> In fact, they expressed strong disagreement to the “misguided demands” of the traditional Jews of the east<sup>17</sup>. Thus the community of Jews was divided not only vis-a-vis the French society but also among the practitioners of Judaism in France.

### III. A move towards Jewish “emancipation”

In 1787, minister Chretien Guillaume De Malesherbes prepared two memoranda describing the status of Protestants in France, resulting in a royal edict declaring that civil rights could not be limited to Catholics. This opened up a debate about non-Catholics and hence the “Jewish question” was raised for consideration.<sup>18</sup> Malesherbes attributed the popular hatred for Jews to the Jewish quality of “remaining a nation within a nation” and sought to “integrate” the Jews as a “religious minority” on par with the Protestants.<sup>19</sup> The rights of Jews were not recognized in the Declaration of 1789. However, the Spanish and Portuguese Jews from southern France petitioned to the Assembly claiming that like the Protestants, they were taking part in the political process in cities like Bordeaux, and thus were not demanding new rights of citizenship but they were “asking to continue to enjoy their existing rights”<sup>20</sup>. The liberal Catholic bishop Charles- Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord, spoke for the Committee on the Constitution endorsing the rights of the above category of Jews.<sup>21</sup> However, it was only on 21 September of 1791 that the Jews of Alsace and Lorraine were finally granted citizenship.<sup>22</sup>

### IV. Arguments against Jewish “emancipation”

The opponents of the Jewish cause argued vehemently against their political empowerment and representation. They insisted that the Jews did not owe allegiance to the nation of France due to their “alien nature” and that their practices such as not bearing arms on the Sabbath, following of peculiar dietary laws and restrictions on professional practices made them unworthy of French society and therefore not deserving of civil rights<sup>23</sup>. The deep rooted prejudice against the Jews is also evident from the criticisms of Abbe Jean Siefert, one of the chief opponents against the granting of Jewish citizenship, who believed that the Jews were intrinsically

<sup>7</sup>ibid.

<sup>8</sup>ibid.

<sup>9</sup>ibid.

<sup>10</sup>ibid.

<sup>11</sup>ibid.

<sup>12</sup>ibid.

<sup>13</sup>ibid.

<sup>14</sup>ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Paula E. Hyman *The Jews of Modern France*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988) 22.

<sup>16</sup>Arthur Hertzberg, *The French Enlightenment and the Jews : the origins of Modern Anti-Semitism*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1990) 314.

<sup>17</sup>Birnbaum Pierre, *Jewish Destinies: citizenship, State, and Community in Modern France*, Hill and Wang, New York, 2000, 42.

<sup>18</sup>Hyman, 21-22.

<sup>19</sup>ibid 22.

<sup>20</sup>Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, (W.W Norton & Company, New York, 2007) 157.

<sup>21</sup>ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Jay R. Berkovitz, “The French evolution and the Jews: Assessing the cultural impact” *Association of Jewish Studies Review*, Vol 20, 1 (1995) 25.

<sup>23</sup>Hertzberg 351.

contemptible and had not become so due their religious practices<sup>24</sup>. Francios Hell, in a pamphlet attempting to exonerate himself from accusations of forgery of receipts allegedly repaying the loans of Jews by Alsatian peasants, considered himself as the champion of “so many oppressed citizens” against the “tyranny of the Jewish nation”<sup>25</sup>. In order to fill more hatred and to instill a sense of urgency and sympathy for the Alsatian peasants, Hell created a story of a Jew who is insistent in offering a loan to a peasant, despite the peasant's reluctance to accept the same. The Jew's persistence finally gives way and the peasant, not fully comprehending the consequences accepts the offer and the terms. The Jew then presents himself several times before the peasant, which results in “passions being inflamed” in the peasant. Seeing the disturbed state of the peasant, the Jew “pretends to be firm” demanding a repayment of the loan, and ends up “renegotiating” for his higher advantage. The young peasant is now completely destroyed. Hell concludes “it is thus that this fils de famille, altered by the fire of debauchery, drinking from the perfidious cup of usury, swallows in one stroke the patrimony he does not yet possess and the dowry of a woman to whom he is not yet engaged”<sup>26</sup>. Thus Francios Hell's portrayal of Jews as “anti-citizens” of evil and greed, a community engaging in usury and trickery to prey on innocent lives was a reinforcement of the prevalent hatred and prejudices against the Jews at the time.

#### V. Citizenship to Jews

The Jews of Alsace, Lorraine and Paris conjointly petitioned to the Assembly seeking citizenship by appealing to the ideological and political rhetoric of the revolution. The petition read “everything is changing; the lot of the Jews must change at the same time; and the people will not be more surprised by this change than by all those which they see around them every day..... attach the improvement of the lot of the Jews to the revolution, amalgamate, so to speak, this partial revolution to the general revolution”<sup>27</sup>. On September 27, 1791 the Assembly recognized the rights of citizenship. The bill that was later signed into law read, “the National Assembly, considering that the conditions necessary to be a French citizen, and to become an active citizen, are fixed by the Constitution, and that any man who, combining the said conditions, takes the civic oath and undertakes to fulfill all the duties that the Constitution imposes has the right to all the advantages it assures: Revokes all adjournments, reservations and exceptions inserted in the preceding decrees regarding individual Jews who shall take the civic oath.”<sup>28</sup>

The new legislation made a distinction between “active” and “passive” citizens. “Active” citizenship meant having political rights to vote and hold public offices<sup>29</sup>. “Active” citizens comprised of men aged twenty five and above and who were capable of paying direct taxes worth three days' labor.<sup>30</sup> This disqualified a majority of Jews to participate in the political process. “Passive” citizenship on the other hand, meant that the state would protect them without recognizing any political right to vote or hold public office<sup>31</sup>. The tactics of resorting to “adjournments, reservations and exceptions” to circumvent addressing the issue of whether Jews were eligible to hold public offices was sought to be corrected.<sup>32</sup> The Jewish community was forced to forego its corporate status and recourse to Jewish judicial institutions and Jewish laws<sup>33</sup>. The question of Jewish “emancipation” was thus a clearly conceived instrument to assimilate the Jews in to the French society so as to make them inconspicuous and devoid of everything that was characteristic of a Jew. Clermont-Tonnerre, a liberal, argued “we must refuse everything to the Jews as a nation and accord everything to Jews as individuals”<sup>34</sup>. Henri-Baptiste Gregoire who was an ardent defender of Jewish rights, criticized the Talmud, hoped that the Yiddish language would be put to disuse and sought to reduce the authority of the Rabbis.<sup>35</sup> Gregoire advocated several measures such as education of Jews along with Christian students, practice of “morally”

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ronald Schechter, “The Jewish Question in Eighteenth Century France” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*

3.2(1998) 87.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Hunt 158.

<sup>28</sup> Schechter Ronald, *Obstinate Hebrews: Representation of Jews in France, 1715-1815*, University of California Press, 2003, 152-153.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid 152.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Hyman 27.

<sup>35</sup> Benbasa Esther, *The Jews of France: A history from antiquity to the present* (Princeton University Press) 75.

uplifting professions such as agriculture and military service.<sup>36</sup> He also advocated several discriminatory practices such as revoking Christian debts to Jews, prohibiting the Jew from acquiring mortgages on Christian property, keeping the Jews from dealing with public funds and requiring Jews to participate in Christian sermons.<sup>37</sup>

#### **VI. The negative responses of “emancipation” on the Jewish community**

Although equality was granted on paper, the first part of 1790s witnessed hostility towards the Jews and widespread discrimination against them persisted. Little impact was felt by the wealthy Jews who were already enjoying citizenship status. However, the following instances reveal that transition was not without obstacles for the newly liberated group. For example, it took four months for them to take the oath of citizenship in the municipality of Strasbourg, despite the passing of legislation to that effect<sup>38</sup>. In another example of lack of political will to implement the rights of the Jews, the mayor of

Bischoffheim obstructed a Jewish group from taking part in elections for Justice of Peace<sup>39</sup>. Further, in the riots that broke out in 1792, Jews were targeted and the military and municipal council had to step in to prevent further harm<sup>40</sup>. Not only were the poor Jews shunned by their own wealthy brethren, but were also forced to experience discrimination at the hands of their hosts and those in authority. Thus despite the recognition of political rights, the Jews were far from being socially accepted.

#### **VII. Conclusion**

Although the Jewish “emancipation” has been justified as a political consideration meant for the upliftment of the Jews, given the political and philosophical changes taking place in modern France on the eve of the revolution, it became an imperative for the sovereign consolidation of power in France to assimilate the Jews. The political trends in Europe at that time demanded a “centralization and rationalization of power” and the creation of a “universal citizen.” Bringing the Jews under the umbrella of a centralized administration was a move of an efficient state to consolidate power. Despite the disunity among the Jews and a lack of political influence on the part of the poorer Jews, the fact that there was a political willingness on the part of the Assembly to recognize their political rights, can only be attributed to other compelling factors that were at play, ultimately changing the course of the Jewish cause in post revolution France.

The irony of the revolutionaries' ideology is that despite the killing of God, hoping to create a totally secular state, France could not shed its Christian influences; there was an underlying hope that the Jews would eventually become 'Gentiles' by converting to Christianity. The agenda for Jewish community as a special category of underdogs that needed to be “emancipated” cannot thus be completely divorced from the heavy Christian burden of lifting the Jews onto a higher moral ground. The traditional view among Christians that the Jewish suffering was due to God's wrath for their cruelty towards Jesus Christ still persisted<sup>41</sup>. The assumption indeed was that the Jews were morally deprived and that they could be redeemed by following a Christian way of life and being loyal to a Christian God. The Sephardic Jews who were admitted on the guise of being “New-Christians” or “*Coversos*” are a classic example of the state's agenda for the Jews.

The Jewish community itself is said to have been undergoing internal institutional and cultural changes even before the Revolution had its effect on the community<sup>42</sup> and therefore the soil was fertile for changes to be welcomed in certain areas. 1770 and 1780 witnessed the power of the Rabbis diminishing and the trend of fall in the observance standards of religious practices<sup>43</sup>. An open arm embrace of modernity by certain segments of the Jewish community can also be attributed to such changes taking place within the community itself. Despite the state's agenda, Jewish identity has thrived and is telling of a community that has embraced modernity along with maintaining, although discreetly, its unique culture and religious practices in France. The “scheming” Jews, who became an embodiment of everything that was “non-citizen” living as a “nation within a nation” could, with the “emancipation” become ideal citizens, “useful” to the French society. The “rebirth” of the Jews is thus neither a myth nor an absolute reality, it is, on the other hand, a story of a resilient community that has survived the onslaught of centuries of human tyranny.

#### **Bibliography**

<sup>36</sup>Ronald Schechter, The Jewish Question, 89.

<sup>37</sup>ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Berkovitz R Jay 52.

<sup>39</sup>ibid.

<sup>40</sup>ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ronald Schechter, The Jewish Question, 86.

<sup>42</sup> Berkovitz R Jay

<sup>43</sup>ibid.

### Books

- [1]. Benbasa, Esther, *The Jews of France: A history from antiquity to the present*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1999.
- [2]. Birnbaum Pierre, *Jewish Destinies: Citizenship, State, and Community in Modern France*, Hill and Wang, New York, 2000.
- [3]. Hertzberg Arthur, *The French Enlightenment and the Jews : the origins of Modern Anti-Semitism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1990.
- [4]. Hunt Lynn, *Inventing Human Rights*, W.W Norton & Company, New York, 2007.
- [5]. Hyman.E Paula, *The Jews of Modern France*, University of California Press, Berkley, 1988.
- [6]. Schechter Ronald, *Obstinate Hebrews: Representation of Jews in France, 1715-1815*, University of California Press, Berkley, 2003.
- [7]. Singham, Shanti Marie, “ Betwixt Cattle and Men: Jews, Blacks and Women and the Declaration of the Rights of Man” in *The French idea of Freedom- The old regime and the Declaration of Rights of 1789*, ed. Dale Vankley, Stafford university Press, 1994.

### Journal Articles

- [1]. Berkovitz R Jay, “The French evolution and the Jews: Assessing the cultural impact” *Association for Jewish Studies Review*, Vol 20, 1 (1995) 25-86.
- [2]. Brown Wendy, “Tolerance and / or equality? the “Jewish question” and the “woman question” *Differences : A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol 15, No 2, Summer 2004, 1-31.
- [3]. Schechter Ronald “ The Jewish Question in Eighteenth Century France” *Eighteenth- Century Studies* 3.2(1998) 84-91.